

## Kids on the Radio

by John Deveck

[BALTIMORE, Maryland - November 2004] We have discussed how the FCC Rules work for low power, unlicensed radio, and I have tried to show just how easy and relatively inexpensive it can be to implement them. I think it is time for a really good anecdote.

And – being me – it is an anecdote about more than 20 low cost installations in schools. Twenty because, well, one seems too easy and perhaps 30 is just bragging. So let us see how easy, inexpensive unlicensed stations can have a real impact in the real world.

### RADIO SPROUTS ON THE DESERT

A long time ago, in a Phoenix suburb far, far away (from the author, at least) a neat little idea germinated into a radio station. Not just any old radio station, but one at an *elementary school* and *run by kids*! How cool is that? Cool enough that there have been more than 20 of these Kid Star Radio stations set up in Arizona now.

These stations stream, they play live on AM and they have interviewed people from Reba McIntire to Senator John McCain. They have been touted by Senator Orrin Hatch on the Senate Floor as a top juvenile crime prevention tool. Yes, we are still talking about little kids. All of it thanks to one teacher and one radio station DJ (or “personality” if you prefer).

Perry Damone (the radio guy) and Linda Tuttle (the teacher) got together and started a station at the Shumway Elementary School in 1988. This Carrier Current AM station signed on at 590 AM with excited kid DJs named things like Crazy Kristen and Airwave Dave.

Perry formed a non-profit organization to help fund KdSTR Radio (aka Kid Star) and even built a Celebrity Golf Tournament to raise money (it is Arizona after all, it is not like it would be a hockey tournament). Sponsors pitching in helped build the kitty up and Kid Star was able to provide equipment at little, or no, cost to many more schools.

The idea behind the Kid Star plan was to find a way to get kids “out of their shell,” and give them a way to build confidence and skills that was both entertaining and valuable. Perry, having spent many years as the afternoon host at KESZ (KEZ-FM), knew a few things about the power of radio. And Linda, having spent many years teaching, knew a few things about how fast kids learn when they are interested. Together, they formed the Kid Star Radio Program, fostering a learning and entertaining environment for elementary age kids.

### A SUCCESS STORY

Kid Star has grown over the years, and trained hundreds, if not thousands, of kids in how to play radio. They have learned how to conduct interviews, meet celebrities, mix their own shows and even do commercial voice work for commercial radio stations! As many as 27 elementary, middle and high schools have participated in some manner, with a core of 18 remaining regularly operational and keeping involved in the program. Rather amazing, when you consider few of the participating DJs are over 12 years old!

As Perry says, “The great thing about Kid Star is how it changes their lives. When they have a chance to interview their heroes, you can see the impact and it’s just amazing.”

The program was designed to build confidence in kids, to help them explore their world more interactively and to make the impossible seem easy. How else do you explain 5th grade homeless kids interviewing First Lady Laura Bush? They did have to point out to her that they could not turn off their TV – as she suggested – and read,

since they did not have TVs – or houses. But they have been able to interview an amazing array of celebrities, politicians and sports figures as part of their Kid Star station.

### DOING A LOT WITH LITTLE

Despite humble beginnings and very limited funding, Kid Star has managed to do some great work. A simple package of Carrier Current AM or 100 mW AM transmitters serve most locations, while some only stream on the web only. They make do with simple studios, built around LPB or Mackie consoles, consumer level CD and Cassette units, microphones and headphones. In some cases, where the schools are able to financially participate, the studios are more elaborate. Many are even working them into a curriculum in technology.

The typical school station is under \$5,000, including both the transmission system and the simple consumer grade equipment. Transmission systems among the Kid Star family include campus-limited vertical antenna AMs (FCC §15.219), 100 mW AM systems (FCC §15.221) and Carrier Current AM units (FCC §15.209). Since most of these systems land in the \$1,000-3,000 range, you can still have plenty left under \$5,000 for studio gear and installation – especially if you can lay your hands on a friendly neighborhood SBE member!

Participating schools cover wide demographics, from wealthy suburban kids to the Thomas J. Pappas School for the Homeless. Several tribal reservation schools are also participating. Your humble author was invited to the ceremonial blessing of the Kid Star station at the Sacaton Elementary School on the Gila River Indian Reservation, a unique life experience to be sure.



KTAO Studio, Sacaton, AZ

Some of the stations are just basic after school activities, but many are much more. Sacaton School, on the Gila River Indian Reservation, has integrated their campus-limited AM system into their technology program. This allows kids to both become a DJ and learn about the technology. They added a web streaming system as well, getting their signal beyond the bounds of terrestrial broadcasting and showing the kids the power of the internet.

### A RADIO SCHOOL FOR HOMELESS

Thomas J. Pappas School for the Homeless is probably the coolest idea I have ever seen in education. It is

really what it says – a school for the homeless founded in 1989. While they receive some funding from the public school system (of which they are a part), financial resources are thin. So they have to ask the community to help. And help it does.

The community has donated buses, equipment, playgrounds, etc., all to try to give homeless kids an equal footing in the educational system. They have had to fight innumerable funding battles and have garnered support from all over the country. Every day they send buses out for kids, some walk in, some move around and come when they can. But they *make an effort* to come to the school because they know it matters and they are not faced with the stigma of being homeless in a traditional public school setting.

Every politician making a stop in Phoenix also stops at Pappas, which often means interesting interviews for the kids. The Pappas School program has been so successful there are now schools for the homeless through High School in Phoenix. With the skyrocketing growth in homeless families, this is an amazing program to have in place and one that should be emulated outside of Arizona.

I think it is safe to say that their parents value the school in ways that the more fortunate among us could never grasp. They have a lot of great things at the school, but among them is a radio station, with a DJ booth and a lot of nice gear, donated by local vendors. It is truly amazing what can happen when a community actually cares about its members, is it not?

### YOUNG TALENT

Copper Canyon Elementary, another early Kid Star adopter, produced one of the more amazing things from its tiny studio of consumer gear: a 5th grader voicing commercials for KEZ! Perry tells the story of the day Nari Ely came to the station to try to voice a commercial for their client, Well For Life.

“She came in to the station; this tiny girl often climbed (with some struggle) up onto the station’s barstool studio chair, took the rough copy [from the owner of Well For Life], started making on-the-fly edits to the material, then sat back and asked if everyone was ready.

“When they were, she pulled the microphone over and whipped off a voiced commercial - *in two takes* - while everyone sat there stunned!” Perry relays this over the phone but you can hear the grin of amazement years after the event. Nari – only 10 at the time – continued to work at Copper Canyon’s station until she moved on to bigger things, like Middle School.



Nari Ely at Copper Canyon Elementary School

So, what does Kid Star mean to these kids? I caught up with Nari, now an ancient 14 years old, and asked her a few questions. Nari is currently working on her singing career, which has already had her singing the National Anthem for the Diamondbacks, performing for the Make-A-Wish Foundation and much more. (Did I mention that she is 14?)

She gives Kid Star most of the credit for both fostering creativity and confidence in kids. “It really was wonderful; we created our own contests [and] developed teamwork and great public speaking confidence. I learned that the DJ is really like the quarterback for the station and how important that public performance is. Kid Star really helped me with the confidence I needed to pursue singing.”

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While it is still a bit early, Nari already has set her sights on Stanford and a Communications major!

Just so you understand that these are not some kind of hyper-financed, super tech stations, here is the basic equipment complement at Copper Canyon: Technics Cassette Deck, Fisher CD Player, Radio Shack mixer, LPB Carrier Current Transmitter/Coupler, Radio Shack Microphone – and they recorded their shows to the cassettes for playback. Not exactly KISS-FM, is it? As they say, it is how you use the instrument, not how shiny it is.

### NEW STATIONS

KCBQ at Cibique High School in Cibique, Arizona is one of the latest Kid Star radio stations, signing on at the beginning of 2004. This campus-limited antenna system is the first radio station on the Fort Apache Reservation in Northern Arizona.

Cibique is a community with about 1,200 residents, a mean income of about \$13,000 and a more than 96% Native American population. Once again, Kid Star brings kids an opportunity they could never have expected.



The crew at KCBQ get ready for their first show.

The organization's ideas and success have begun to reach out around the nation and the globe. Interest in starting Kid Star programs has come from Florida and New Jersey, as well as Rome and Stockholm, including representatives flying in to Phoenix to visit local operations. Perry hopes that the idea will take root and benefit kids everywhere.

### STRUGGLES AND SUCCESSES

It is not always easy to get a station established and maintained. "What we need to find are regional commitments by school systems, which can be supported locally by committed teachers," Perry explains, "Without a daily commitment from teachers and schools, Kid Star can't happen – it results in a dusty, unplugged studio. We've even seen a case where a new principal simply killed the *free* program with no explanation."

### WAYS TO HELP OUT

In this author's humble opinion, it would certainly make sense for a radio group to support creating Kid Star stations within their local

schools. Get the local teachers to commit the basic time, send your talent in to hang out with the kids and show them how it is done. In return you get PR that is priceless, for less than \$5,000 a school. If you have a stockroom of older, but serviceable gear available, you get a donation and great PR. And if you are really lucky, you get someone like Nari Ely that you can hire!

Shortly the newest Kid Star station will be up with the Scottsdale Boys & Girls Club—the first Boys & Girls Club in the country to have its own radio station, and a

continuation of the great work of Kid Star in opening doors for kids in need of support. Do yourself a favor and look at what these people are doing. It is, to borrow Perry's words, "Truly amazing to see."

Perry has had help from Martin James, a local printer and big supporter of the program. They hope to expand operations throughout the US. If you wish to reach Perry, you can do so at Damone Management in Phoenix at 480-816-0892 or [perrydamone@damonemanagement.com](mailto:perrydamone@damonemanagement.com).

Martin may be reached through the same number, and Kid Star is on the web at [www.kidstar.org](http://www.kidstar.org).

If you know someone with spare equipment, or in need of a tax deduction, please try to help out this great cause. Do radio a favor and support a new generation of kids, before the computers take over!

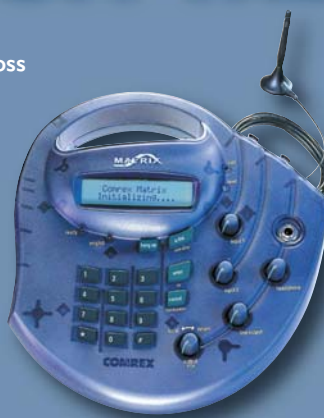
*John Deveck is the Operations Manager of WLOY at Loyola College in Maryland, but he has a secret past involving lots of schools and boiler rooms and other icky places to hide low power transmitters in the service of good. He can be most easily found via email at [wloy@loyola.edu](mailto:wloy@loyola.edu)*



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